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Iran Holds American Journalist

No Charges Made; Writer Was Invited To Cover Gulf War

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TEHRAN, Feb. 1—The Iranian government, which last week invited nearly 100 foreign journalists to cover its latest offensive against Iraq, has detained the Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, Gerald F. Seib.

Iranian officials from the government's Ministry of Guidance, which had accredited Seib, an American, refused to comment on why he was detained yesterday, two days after his passport was taken by government officials without explanation.

An Islamic Republic News Agency report late yesterday alleged that a spy for the "Zionist regime" of Israel had been detained in Iran after entering the country posing as a journalist and using a false passport. The three-paragraph report, monitored in Cyprus, did not name the alleged spy nor give his nationality. It was not clear if the report referred to Seib.

It is not known where Seib is being held. His U.S. colleagues, including this reporter, whose visas expired at midnight yesterday, left Tehran this morning after unsuccessful efforts to contact him again.

[In New York, Norman Pearlstine, managing editor of the Journal, said, "Jerry Seib is a highly respected foreign correspondent and there can be no basis for his detention. We are seeking explanations through Iranian and other diplomatic channels. We hope any confusion will be cleared up and we are requesting his immediate release from detention and from Iran."]

A State Department protest today over the incident underlined the

fact that Seib had entered Iran at the invitation of the Iranian government and that he carried a valid U.S. passport.

There was no indication in Tehran why the 30-year-old, Cairo-based correspondent had been singled out for detention. He was one of a group of close to 100 journalists invited to Iran in the past two weeks to cover the latest offensive against the southern Iraqi port of Basra.

Seib went on a ministry tour to the front last week, then returned to Tehran to cover a press conference Wednesday by the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Hojatolislam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Seib's problems began when he and other American and British journalists sought to have their five-day visas extended to make suitable airline departure plans.

Hassan Fekri, an official at the ministry's press office, said there would be "no problem" getting short renewals. He issued the journalists letters that were to be taken, with their passports, to an office of the Iranian Immigration Department.

On Thursday, six journalists who had applied for visa extensions were granted them and their passports were returned. Seib's was not because, he was told, there was an unspecified "problem."

That night Seib received the first of several telephone calls from a man who identified himself as "Mr. Jalala" of the Immigration Department. He repeated that there was a problem and promised to visit him at his hotel—the same hotel, formerly a Hilton, where former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane stayed for four nights last May during his secret visit to negotiate an arms-for-hostages swap.

But Jalala never appeared, and a check of the Immigration Department revealed that no Mr. Jalala worked there. This alarmed Iranians familiar with the situation, as it indicated that the case had moved beyond the Immigration Department and probably into the hands of Iran's secret police, the Sevama.

On Friday, Seib contacted the Swiss Embassy. The embassy has represented U.S. interests in Iran since the two countries broke diplomatic relations following the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in 1979.

A Swiss Embassy official accompanied Seib to the Immigration Department yesterday morning after the journalist received a phone call, again from Jalala, asking him to appear at 10 a.m. Seib said later that he encountered great confusion and no one seemed to know where his passport was. After a two-hour wait and after dealing with a number of minor officials who seemed not to know—or not to want to know—about the case, the Swiss diplomat said nothing could be done. He took Seib to the Swiss Embassy for protection.

About the same time, Fekri, of the Guidance Ministry, disclaimed any responsibility for the case. "This is not our responsibility," he told Seib and a group of reporters. "Our responsibility was to bring you to the front, nothing else. Now that that has been accomplished, we have nothing more to do with you."

Fekri's attitude all along had indicated he was never happy with the presence of American journalists in Iran and throughout their visit he had tried to restrict their reporting—other than on their visit to the war front. He warned the three Americans—Charles Campbell of The Associated Press, Roberto Suro of the New York Times and this correspondent—who had stayed on to lend Seib moral support that they should not remain in Tehran any longer or they, too, would be detained.

Seib and another Swiss diplomat returned to Seib's hotel room but were not allowed to collect his belongings. When the two tried to leave the hotel yesterday afternoon they were detained by plainclothed police.

The Swiss diplomat was released about 30 minutes later.